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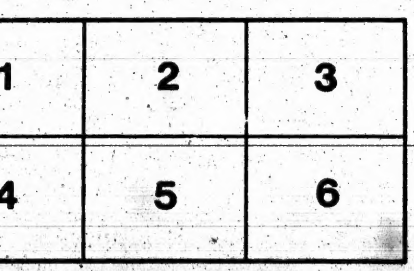


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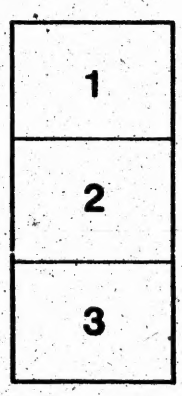

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# SERMON

BY THE

## Reverend G. Smellie,

MINISTER OF THE

CANADA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

FERGUS, ONT., DOMINION OF CANADA.

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Preached on Sabbath, the 13th of December, 1868, being the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of his Settlement.

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GUELPH:
PRINTED AT THE "HERALD" BOOK AND JOB OFFICE, WYNDHAM STREET.
1869.

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# PREFACE.

The following outline has been sent through the press at the request of the Managers of the congregation of Melville Church. And the Author consented to their request, not because he thought his remarks furnished anything of a Sermon on the text which heads them, but because they present a few facts which may be interesting and useful to his hearers at large.

G. S.

# SERMON.

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Acts xx. 27.—"I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God."

It is twenty-five years, this 13th December, since I was settled minister in Fergus. At that date I was the only minister, of any denomination, in the place, and, so far as I know, there was no other, and certainly no Presbyterian minister, directly north of us within the bounds of the Province. When I now look around me, how few do I recognize of those who originally composed my congregation. Ought not such of us as remain, to cherish gratitude to Almighty God for his forbearance and mercy, in that we are still the living to praise Him? Should we not be filled with humility, when we call to mind His dealings with us, and our unprofitableness under these? And should we not be exercised in anxiety when, with all our experience of the past, we turn to the uncertain and momentous future?

At the outset, let me notice a few *facts* connected with our history and position as a congregation. And

*First*,—Of the five Elders who, along with myself, composed the Session at the time referred to, not one survives. Eighteen others have from time to time been added; and exactly *one-half* of these now remain in connection with us.

*Second*.—The Communion Roll then numbered 275—mostly heads of families, for the great majority of the members were then in the prime of life—lately emigrated—and their children not grown up. As there had been a vacancy of two years, and in the meantime a considerable number of new settlers had come in, the Roll was soon increased, and contained 449 names before we left old St. Andrew's Church, in 1847. However, by the time it was first made up in connection with our new organization in this church, it had, in consequence of a number being left behind, fallen to 360. But in the course of twenty one years thereafter, there have been, from first to last, enrolled upwards of 1,050 persons, who have been, or still are, connected with Melville Church. If, however, you take into account the fluctuating nature of a portion of the population of this country; the number that has been removed by death; the facts that both Presbyterian churches in the neighboring village of Elora were largely made up at first of members of this congregation; that a flourishing congregation at Douglas, and more recently another at Cumnock, were formed in corners of our original field, you will not be astonished to hear that our present

roll does not exceed 425. Though our increase during last year was 32, yet that has been nearly counterbalanced by the number of certificates of disjunction granted and the deaths which have taken place.

*Third.*—The number of children that I have baptized in connection with my charge here has been over *one thousand*. These, it may be said, have all sprung into existence during the twenty-five years of my incumbency. Many of them have been carried away in early life, as general statistics show that about *one-half* of those who are born die within the first few years of their existence. We have always had a sabbath school in connection with the church, which all the children within a reasonable distance were invited to attend. The attendance has been from 100 to 120; and allowing, at an average, five years for the period of the attendance of each young person who entered, would give 600 as the entire number that have been connected with the school. Now, what has become of these? A goodly number—in some cases, as many as five and six out of single families—have been received into full communion with the church; some have joined other churches; many have removed from this neighborhood; one is now a useful and respected minister in our church; two who were then youths, are now in the eldership; some are sabbath school teachers; many are settled in life as heads of families; and several have their own children now in attendance at the sabbath school. We are now a generation in advance of what we were when, as your pastor, I first addressed you—the survivors of the original congregation.

*Fourth.*—Shall I at present advert to our financial position? It may be proper, in the circumstances, to do so, both because pecuniary means are indispensable to the continuance of ordinances and to the prosperity of any congregation; and also because the state of a church's finances forms no mean index of its spiritual condition. This congregation has expended from $5,000 to $6,000 on church property, which still remains to them. Their annual revenue, which from 1843 has nearly tripled, is now from $1,400 to $1,500. In all, from $30,000 to $35,000 have been contributed by this congregation since its commencement, of which sum more than one-half either remains in the form of property or has been expended in maintaining the decency and comfort of your place of worship, or been devoted to missionary and other ecclesiastical objects beyond your immediate pale. Now, if we consider that twenty-five years ago large tracts of the surrounding country, which now present comfortable homesteads, were unreclaimed from the forest, and that our now flourishing village was composed of about a score and a half of houses, mostly log buildings; if you still further take into account how much the condition of the early settlers has been in the meantime improved, it may remain a question whether your liberality has kept pace with your means, and whether you have been discharging your duty to the Giver of all good, who is also the Head of the Church. And if you examine the statistics of the church generally, you will find that small congregations are often doing far more, in proportion to their numbers, than large ones; and that many congregations struggling for existence are in reality doing twice as much per member as we are doing. I state these things merely as facts in the meantime; and I proceed to inquire

*Fifthly*—What has been done spiritually during the period under consideration? The ecclesiastical machinery has been put fully in operation. We have had our twelve hundred sabbaths. Upwards of two thousand discourses have been preached; and, of course, an equal number of portions of the word of God brought under our notice. The Lord's table has been spread fifty times; and thousands of times have we professedly united in offering up praise and prayer. Now, before asking you as to the *results*, permit me still further to dwell on

I.—THE PAST—no more to return. And in the language of the context, I would beg to say—

1. That while "ye know from the first day that I came * * * after what manner I have been with you at all seasons,"—I am conscious of having served the Lord "with all humility of mind," under a sense of much unworthiness, manifold shortcomings, of which none can be so sensible as I am myself, and of inadequacy to the great and important work, for "Who is sufficient for these things?" Literally, "I have been with you" often "in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling."

2. I trust I have also a good conscience in asserting that "I have kept back nothing that was profitable unto you." I dare not take you to record and say that "I am pure from the blood of all men;" but I can say, that "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." I have always made it my object to give my best energies to the preaching of the word, as the highest function of the ministry. And from this place I have endeavored to exhibit, so far as I apprehended it, the entire truth—whether acceptable or unacceptable to any hearers—travelling the whole range of doctrine and duty, and aiming, with variety and suitableness, to give every one his "portion of meat in due season." The topics on which I have chiefly insisted have been the doctrines of grace and salvation; in other words, evangelical truth,—all else introduced in relation to that; and corresponding practice. I have urged the necessity of embracing Christ for ourselves, and proving our interest in Him by the fruits brought forth in the life; or as the apostle in the context summarily expresses it, "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ"—*i. e.*, turning from sin to God in the way of his appointment; seeing our personal need of salvation, in order to our valuing the offered remedy; believing in the Son as the only way of access to the Father; and the purifying nature of a justifying faith.

3. Besides the public preaching of the word on the sabbath, there have been instituted prayer meetings on other days of the week, and bible classes for the instruction of the young. I have also "taught from house to house," on all such occasions reading a portion of the scriptures, and lifting up the voice of prayer; adapting my instructions to circumstances, and endeavouring, in the case of the aged and infirm, who were unable to attend on public ordinances, to exhibit more frequently and more fully the leading truths of our holy faith. The great duties of christianity, at the same time, have not been lost sight of, but urged upon your observance, as families and individuals. Have I not also dealt specially with many of you in private, admonishing, warning

and entreating you, as the case required? Have I not been present to sympathize and counsel in the day of trial and adversity, as well as to rejoice with you on more auspicious occasions? And few of your habitations are there which I have not visited in a time of sickness, or in which I have not, in the providence of God, been called to minister in connection with the funeral rites of some dear departed relative—when the heart might be softened and the thoughts directed to another world.

Now, to come to

II.—THE PRESENT—the evanescent present. I would ask, in all solemnity, what are the results?—

1. In regard to the community at large. Have we, as a congregation, exercised a salutary restraining or leavening influence? Is the world around us better for our labours, and for your profession and practice?

2. In regard to the congregation itself. Is there aught of a healthier religious tone among us? Or is it, that the more advanced in life, through growing prosperity, have become more worldly in their spirit, and fallen away from many of the good habits of their fatherland and of earlier days; and that the young, in many cases, escaping from the religious training and exemplary influence of their parents, gradually descending into the dust, have apparently thrown off the fear of God and regard for religious ordinances? Have there been many?—and how many?—or have any been brought from darkness to light? Who have been born again? Or have any of those who, previously to their connection with us, believed, been edified, nourished, and advanced in faith, holiness and comfort? These are questions which may not be definitely answered, except by individuals in reference to themselves, until the Great Day. But, surely, some impression respecting them is made on every reflecting mind; and is that impression humbling, or is it animating and encouraging?

3. In regard to ourselves personally. And here we may, and ought to, be more definite. It becomes every one to review the past, and examine into the results of a spiritual nature derived in his own case. The *old*—the remnant of the original congregation, for only about one-fifth of the male heads of families remains in connection with us—should see whether a quarter of a century of privilege has been blessed to them, or spent to no profit. The *young*, who have grown up among us, and spent the most critical and important period of their lives in our society, we would question as to their experience. Have you seen life, and the world, and the things of Eternity, in their true light?—or are you still carried away with vanity and a deceived heart? And those who in *middle age*, or otherwise, have joined us from other quarters, we ask, Has it been to your spiritual profit, or the reverse, that you entered our communion? If the latter, has the fault been owing to yourselves or to us? If at all to yourselves, be persuaded to ponder the matter and correct your fault, lest you be left in a downward career. In any circumstances, look to God without delay, and ask help. In short—and I appeal to the consciences of all—has the relation subsisting between us and any of you, whether for a longer or a shorter time,

proved a blessing, or has it failed of that?—or do you regard the result as doubtful? If you hold it doubtful, the probability is that you are afraid to face the question and examine into the matter thoroughly; and that the truth of the case is adverse to you. But allowing it to be doubtful, how long has it been so?—and how long is it to continue so? It were time that, in regard to a subject of such overwhelming importance, you place yourselves beyond doubt, contingency or hazard; and that you do not further pursue a course which, in all probability—with almost certainty—and, unless corrected, assuredly will land you in destruction.*

The past is gone; the present alone is ours, and it is evanescent—a point ever receding into the past—taking its complexion from what is bygone, and, perhaps, involving the interests of all time to come. Twenty-five years GONE! What are they? Like a dream. Twenty-five to COME! Who dares anticipate them? In all likelihood, scarcely one of those who met this day twenty-five years ago, will then be in the land of the living. Some of the young among us may see that time; but to each of you, my dear friends, old or young, how uncertain is it:

> "Like crowded forest trees we stand,
> And some are marked to fall;
> The axe will smite at God's command,
> And soon shall smite us all."

Therefore, let us all prepare for the will of God concerning us; for soon we shall see one another's face no more; the dust shall cover us, and we shall not meet again until confronted at the bar of God, to answer for the manner in which we have severally discharged our duties—the manner in which we have respectively spoken and heard. Wherefore, let me further direct your attention for a moment to

III.—THE FUTURE—the dark and uncertain future. Changes are continually taking place around us, and will ere long affect ourselves. Be exhorted, then, earnestly and without delay, to secure your personal salvation: those of you who have hitherto neglected this important concern, to seek it with your whole hearts; and those who have trusted in the Lord Jesus, to abide in Him, and maintain a well-grounded assurance that they are His. The Lord waits to be gracious, Christ is freely offered, and the Holy Spirit pleads. "The Spirit and the Bride say, Come; and let him that heareth say, Come; and let him that is athirst come; and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." Brethren, give diligence to make "your calling and election sure."

Before closing, permit me to glance at some of the Apostle's sentiments which succeed the text, as I have already done at others which precede it. And

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* NOTE.—I feel at this time that I should be wanting in duty and in gratitude to the God of all grace, if I were to refrain from mentioning the gracious outpouring of His Holy Spirit with which the congregation has been recently visited. During the last Spring, through an instrumentality—the sending of which was apparently as sovereign as the blessing which accompanied it—many careless persons, young and old, were led to concern about the salvation of their souls; many professors who were at ease were awakened and brought to rely on the Lord Jesus Christ, and many believers were quickened. The congregation never enjoyed such a time of refreshing before. New life seems to pervade it; and it is to be hoped that the fruit may abide, and be reaped in eternal glory. G. S.

1st. Respecting Duty.—Let us devote ourselves afresh to the work which the Master has assigned us, and according to our relative position and responsibility, whether as minister, elder, or church member, as parent or child, as sabbath school teacher or scholar, endeavour faithfully to fulfil all our obligations. I would especially, in all affection, remind my brethren in the eldership of the apostle's words—"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood; for," he adds, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

2nd. Respecting Danger.—It is evident from these words that the inspired servant of God foresaw danger approaching, and he gave warning to the elders at Ephesus. Are there not, or may there not be, still dangers in some form threatening the church of God—particular portions of it, or individual christians? We are each exposed to perils innumerable from within and from without: from Satan, the arch-enemy, from the world, and from false teachers. Therefore let us watch, and be prepared for all possibilities—guarding against personal danger, and praying that those with whom we are associated may be preserved from the hand of the enemy. And in this connection I would say that, as it does not always fall to the lot of a minister to address parting words to his people, except when he removes to another sphere of labour, for he is generally arrested in his course and laid low without opportunity to take a formal farewell—uncertain of the future, we wish these reflections on the experience of a quarter of a century, to be remembered and acted on by those of you who shall outlive us. And when the time shall arrive that you are called to take part in the selection of a successor, aware of the incalculable evils of hasty decision and of an unsuitable choice, we would have you proceed in that duty with prayerfulness and calmness, with a due regard to your own spiritual welfare and that of the congregation, and to the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom and glory in this place.

3rd. Finally, Respecting the Source of Strength.—We bear you now, and at all times, on our heart at a throne of grace. May the God of Israel bless you and your households with all temporal and all spiritual blessings. And with full confidence in the kindness of His providence and the all-sufficiency of His grace, and assured that if you follow the directions and imbibe the spirit of His holy word, you shall not fail to obtain at last admission into that kingdom of glory which is the free gift of God, for which His redeemed shall be made meet, and which is "incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away," we "commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

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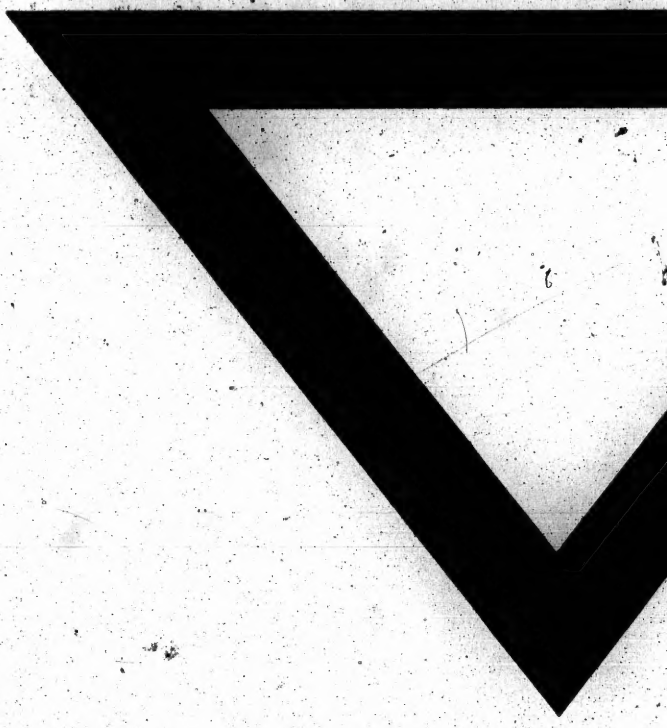
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